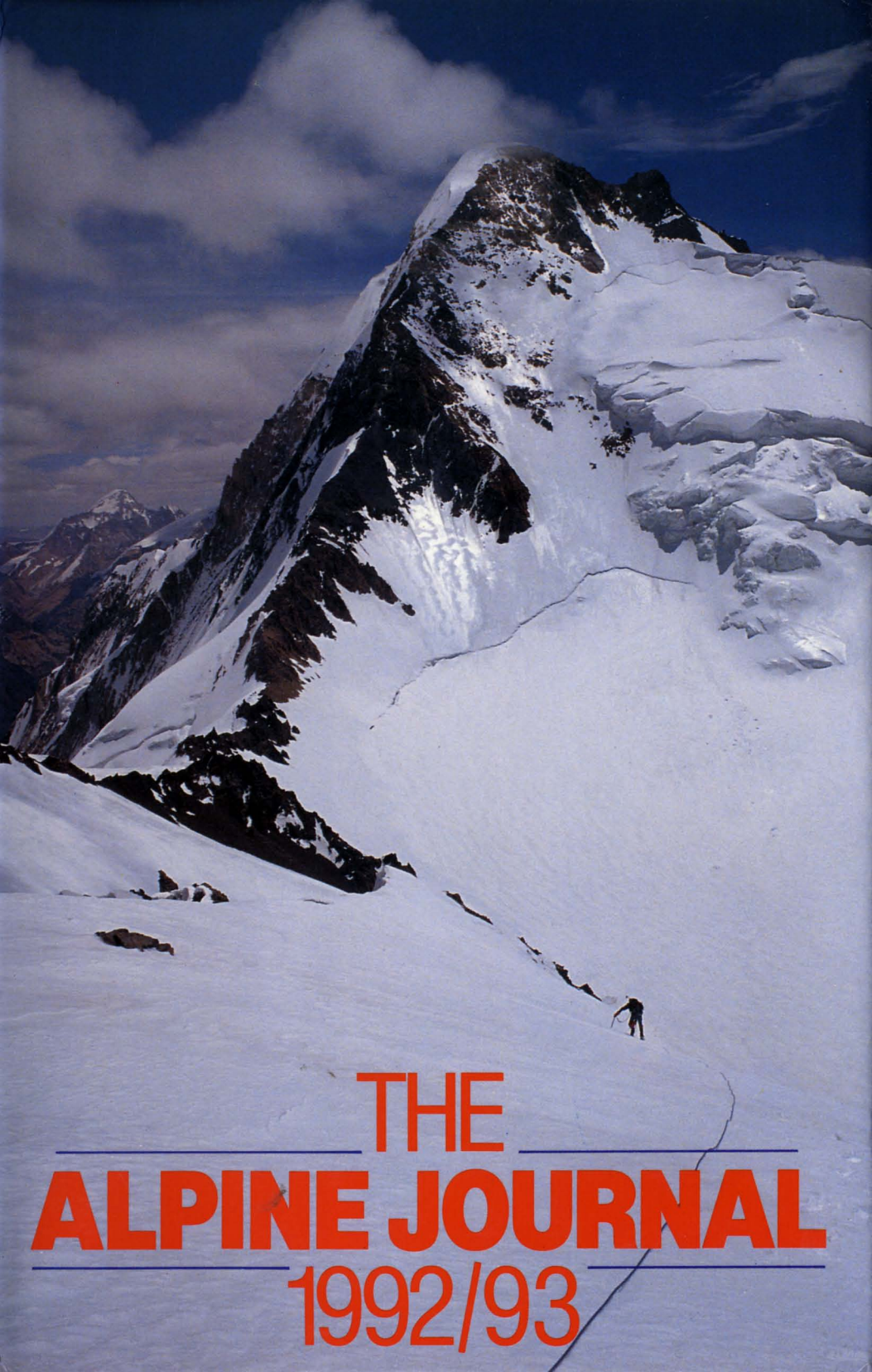


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Jacket photographs: *front*, Chong Kumdan I, East Karakoram (Paul Nunn); *back*, Kongsfjorden and Dronningfjella, Spitsbergen (Simon Fraser)

HUTCHINSON

Chong Kumdan – An Unknown Mountain

DAVE WILKINSON

(Plates 8–10 and front cover)

All the highest and best-known mountains of the Karakoram are in Pakistan, in territory taken from India since Partition in 1947. At the eastern end of the range, in India, there is a geographically remote area which has remained largely unexplored. Its obscurity is easily understood: owing to border disputes with both Pakistan and China, this part of the range is controlled by the Indian army, which will allow no foreign visitors – except as part of a joint expedition with Indian climbers.

In the autumn of 1990 an old friend, Harish Kapadia from Bombay, telephoned me to propose just such a joint Indo–British expedition. The objective, Chong Kumdan, was an unclimbed 7000m peak that had never even been attempted before, and it was the highest of a group of big mountains, all of them similarly virgin. The obscurity of the region appealed greatly to my exploratory instincts but travel there would not be simple. Harish had been as far as a base camp site in 1989 and he also had a Major-General in the Indian army for a cousin. He had been assiduously cultivating contacts in high places which would help to oil the wheels of transport. Even so, the dreaded Asian bureaucracy could hardly be avoided altogether, and I had to be careful to choose British team members who would be patient in the face of setbacks. Several recent joint parties in this region have been ruined by disputes. So I chose a team of old and trusted friends – 'old' in both senses.

The start of July saw twelve climbers, six from each country, together with a ton of food and gear, bumping along in a hired bus over the Rohtang La, the first of four 5000m passes, across the Himalaya to the town of Leh, capital of Ladakh and gateway to the Eastern Karakoram, an historic stop on the old caravan route from Kashgar. It was the most amazing road journey any of us had ever experienced. We had all been on spectacular and dangerous drives before, but none quite like this – for three days continuously.

Our application for permission from the Indian authorities had been for three months, but some bungling bureaucrat in Delhi had issued the permit for only three weeks. When this was pointed out to him he was quite unrepentant, insisting that three weeks was long enough to climb any mountain: 'What do you want to do, build a house there?' We rather nervously showed our three-week permit to the Commissioner in Leh. He roared with laughter, and issued us with a permit to stay in his district until sometime in November. He made no secret of his contempt for 'those Delhi wallas'. Onwards from Leh, Harish's army contacts ensured for us the red carpet treatment. We were sped by luxury

army truck over the 5400m Khardung La, on a road with a surface like the summit region of Glyder Fach. This 5mph journey was enough to bruise every bone in our bodies, but the Indian army's hospitality was superb, with full meals and accommodation on the way and drinks in the officers' mess. The road journey ended at the army camp at Sasoma, half-way up the Nubra valley towards the snout of the war-torn Siachen glacier.

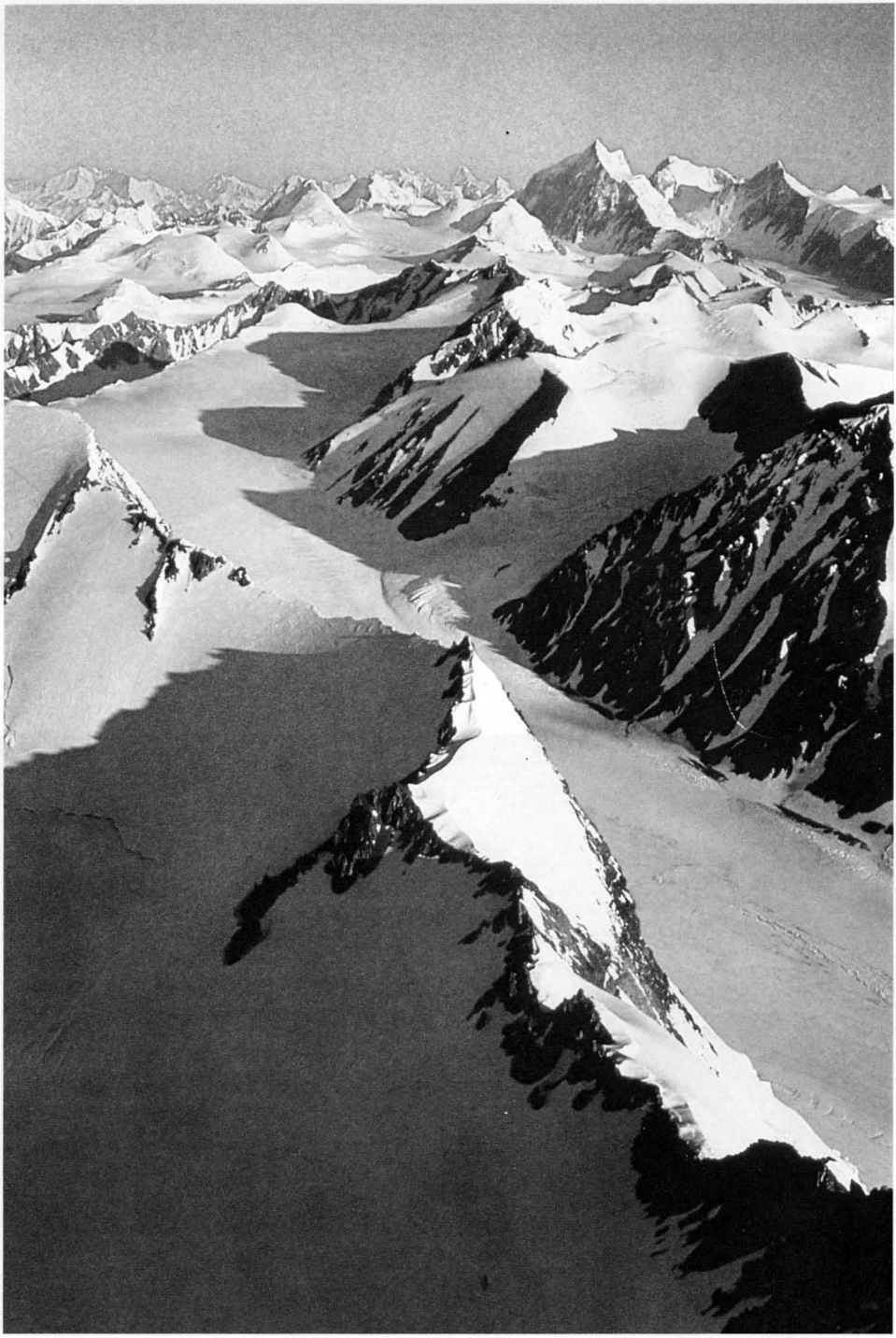
The walk-in was refreshingly different, the loads being carried by pack-horses rather than by the usual porters. Nightly stopping places always have to be a compromise between the ideal distance, a good campsite and the need to cross glacier-fed streams in the cool of early morning when melt-water levels are lower. But the horses added an extra factor, for we had to stop within reach of grazing, not always plentiful in the Karakoram desert.

We followed the old trade route over the 5200m Saser La. This started with the infamous 'Tulum Patila', a 500m ascent of granite slabs where the track, in 35 zigzags, followed natural terraces where possible. Elsewhere, engineers of a bygone age had hacked at the rock and built up the track with stones placed over the slab surface. Above this, the valley broadened out and we walked for two days over desert plains, boulder slopes and grassy meadows, with unclimbed peaks all around. The final ascent to the top of the pass was over a boulder field, followed by a snow-covered glacier. The way was strewn with a grim debris, the bones of generations of horses which had succumbed on the way – victims of storm, altitude exhaustion or simply a broken fetlock. Beyond the col, the final army camp at Saser Brangza provided more of the VIP treatment.

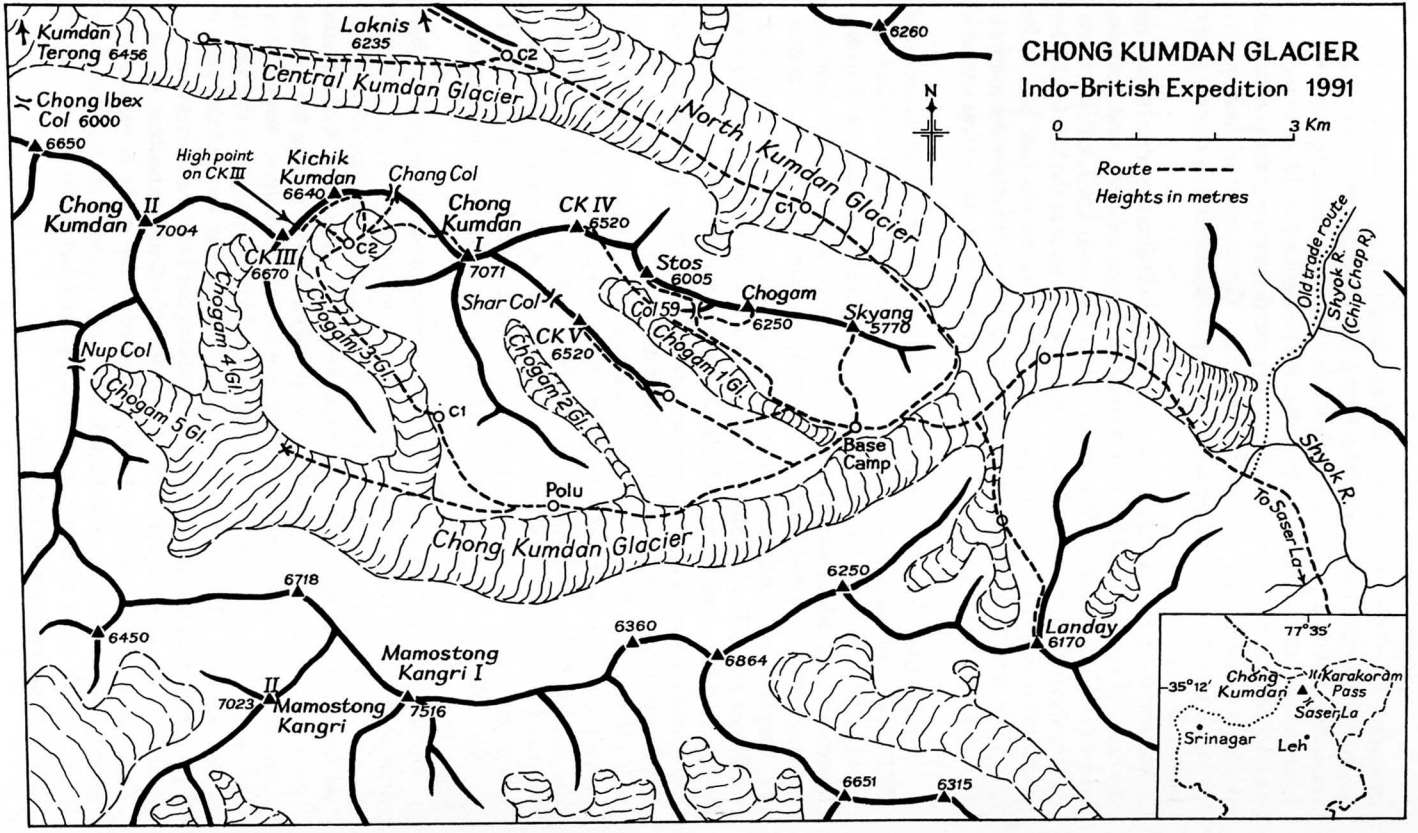
'Well Harish, what's the next pass to cross?' There were no more. We walked on through the valley of the upper reaches of the Shyok river, a place of staggering wildness and beauty. There was no habitation at all. Great desert plains of stones and dust skirted the Shyok's bank. On our right rose huge cliffs of blood-red rock; to our left, rubble-covered glacier snouts crawled down to the river's edge, backed by the unclimbed snowy peaks from whence they came. The final day to Base Camp followed the Chong Kumdan glacier. The horses excelled themselves here, but required our help in a few places where we had to build a path for them over the steeper bits of rubble-covered ice. Base Camp itself was in a flat ablation valley, with small patches of grass and a profusion of alpine flowers.

All that remained was to climb our mountain. Most Himalayan expeditions have permission to climb only one specific peak. With commendable optimism, Harish assured us that we were permitted to climb anything in the area. We were not too sure about this, but believed him because we wanted to. Our main objective was to climb Chong Kumdan in alpine style, in a single push without ferrying loads or fixing ropes. But we needed to acclimatise gradually to the altitude and had still to find a route on this unknown mountain which hid shyly behind its lower companions. So we combined reconnaissance with acclimatisation on some of the lower peaks of the group.

We started with 6520m Chong Kumdan V. A large sociable party of six Brits and two Indians climbed its SE ridge. This was mostly walking but involved an icy traverse near the top to avoid an appallingly loose section of limestone



8. View from Chong Kumdan I: K2 (centre distance), Rimo group (right). (*John Porter*) (p15)


CHONG KUMDAN GLACIER
Indo-British Expedition 1991
0
3 Km
Route
Heights in metres
N
Kumdan Terong 6456
Laknis 6235
C2
Central Kumdan Glacier
6260
North Kumdan Glacier
Chong Ibex Col 6000
6650
High point on CK III
Kichik Kumdan 6640
Chang Col
Chong Kumdan II 7004
CK III 6670
C2
Chong Kumdan I 7071
CK IV 6520
C1
Stos 6005
Chogam 6250
Col 59
Skyang 5778
Shar Col
CK V 6520
Chogam 1 Gl.
Chogam 2 Gl.
Chogam 3 Gl.
Chogam 4 Gl.
Chogam 5 Gl.
Nup Col
Base Camp
Polu
Chong Kumdan Glacier
Old trade route
Shyok R. (Chip Chap R.)
Shyok R.
To Saser La
6718
6450
6360
6864
6250
Landay 6170
Mamostong Kangri I 7516
Mamostong Kangri II 7023
6651
6315
77°35'
35°12'
Chong Kumdan
Karakoram Pass
Saser La
Srinagar
Leh

pinnacles. From the summit, we had fine views of the southern and eastern approaches to the main peak. John Porter had contemplated a route up the rocks and mixed ground of its S face, but after sampling the rock quality on this lower neighbour he abandoned that idea. We thought we could see a couple of possible rockless lines from this side, but dry weather earlier in the year had left the slopes depressingly grey and icy-looking. The thought of four or five thousand feet of front-pointing at altitude appealed only slightly more than the loose rock.

Meanwhile Harish, last of the great explorers, had taken the other Indians up the main glacier to see what was round the corner, over the next horizon, whether CKI looked easier from the far side, what about CKII, CKIII, etc, etc . . . He also took with him the Base Camp cook and much of the best food. This could have been attributed to pure self-indulgence on his part but, to be charitable, was probably intended to encourage others to forsake the comforts of Base Camp and spend more time in the actual mountains, a most laudable aim.

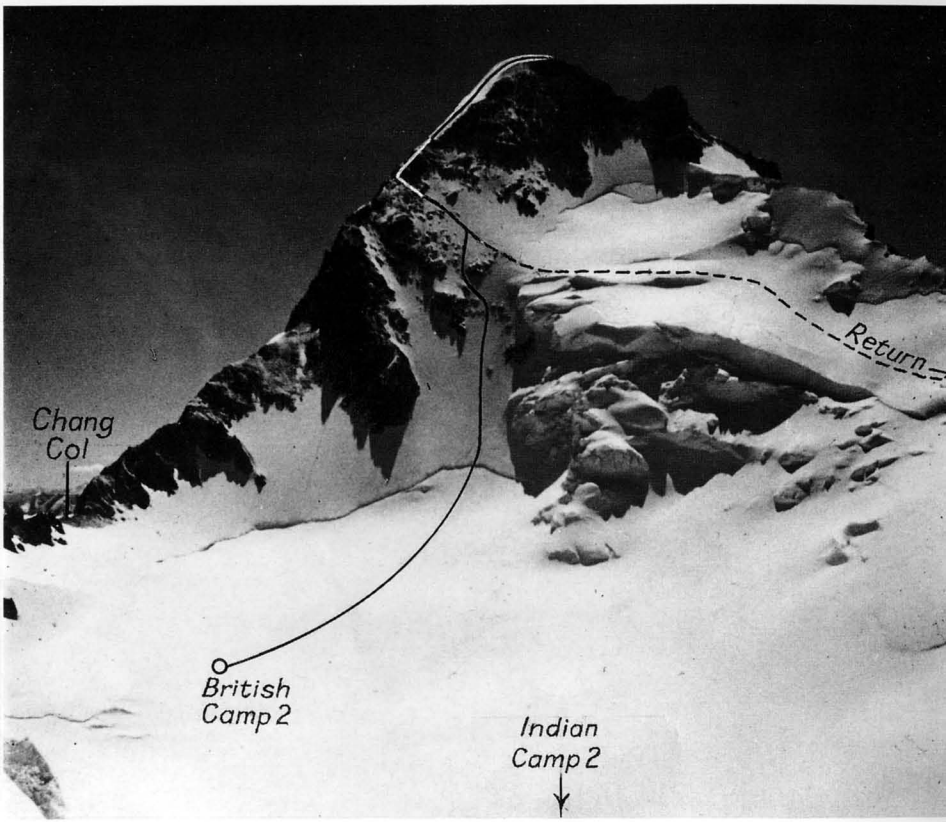
Next, Bill Church and I explored the E ridge of CKI by way of an ascent of CKIV. But the connecting ridge between the two mountains looked discouragingly narrow, corniced, icy, long and pinnacled, so we gave up that idea. Meanwhile, the others had gone after Harish to chase up the good food and cooking service, and also to have a look at the far side of the hill. Back at base, we compared notes with John and with Neil McAdie. Their proposed line up the W face and NW ridge sounded the best bet yet, so we decided to attempt this as a party of four. Paul Nunn and Lindsay Griffin were delayed by their fine first ascent and traverse of Kichik Kumdan (6640m). They returned, tired out, just as we were about to leave – and so missed the big one.

The approach to the far side of the mountain was a two-day glacier flog. At the half-way camp there was a moderate snowfall, so we spent a day waiting for the weather and wondering what to do. Next morning was little better, so I proposed going back to Base Camp and waiting for a more settled spell. But the other three were more optimistic and dissuaded me from such wimpish thoughts. As we carried on up to the foot of our route the weather steadily improved, which left me feeling rather foolish.

We caught up with Harish and his team at their camp on the glacier. Their forte is mountain exploration and ascents of moderate difficulty; they had decided to give CKI a miss. Earlier that day they had attempted the easier CKIII (6670m), but were stopped by a difficult bergschrund/icecliff. CKIII remains unclimbed, but they did reach the 6300m Chang col overlooking the Central Kumdan glacier. Later on, the Indians, not easily discouraged, made a very successful exploration of the latter glacier, which lies just N of the Chong Kumdan group. The first ever party to pass here, they reached the 6000m Chong Ibex col at the glacier's head, overlooking the Terong glacier system and linking up with ground explored by the earlier Indo-British expedition in 1985. They also made first ascents of two untouched peaks on the N bank of this glacier, Laknis (6235m) and Kumdan Terong (6456m); all this was done following 2½ days of heavy snow which greatly hampered travel – a fine display of patience and perseverence.



9. Chong Kumdan V, 6520m: turning loose pinnacles on the final ridge. (*Dave Wilkinson*) (p15)



10. Chong Kumdan I, 7071m, from the slopes of Chong Kumdan III. The route of the first ascent, via the W face and NW ridge, 4 August 1991. (*Muslim H Contractor*) (p15)

Any slightly resentful thoughts we might have had over Harish's prolonged absence from Base Camp (together with the food and cook) were instantly dispelled by his personality and charm. As soon as we appeared he would snap his fingers at the cook: 'Pasang, *chaieee*!' Minutes later, steaming mugs of tea appeared in our hands, and we were being encouraged and quizzed about our plans for the morrow by this delightfully high-spirited enthusiast.

Although our mountain was not formidably steep, we could see no obvious easy line from any direction. This side looked as hard as the others, but the long glacier approach gained much height, leaving only 800m for the route itself. A route of this length should be possible in a day in the Alps, but at this altitude the body is not capable of speedy ascents (at least, my ageing body is not). There would be no *voie normale* for the descent – this was supposed to be the ordinary route that we were pioneering. After some discussion, we decided that we were quite fit, took a chance and packed light sacks with minimal hardware and no bivouac gear. We had committed ourselves to getting up and down in a day. The sun gradually sank behind CKII as we finished our final brew of many. We set our alarms for midnight.

In the dark, the lower part of the W face was like any alpine ice face. We made good time by climbing mostly unroped, with two men trailing ropes to save the need for coiling and uncoiling. At one-third height we came to a halt – dangerously hollow ice caused doubts about the best line. A descent and traverse left regained safer ground, but the steeper ice called for proper belayed climbing. Neil was having a hard time, slowed down by an Asian stomach bug, and we seemed to be losing momentum. We had been unable to photograph the night-time action but now, with dawn approaching, cameras came out, adding to the delay. For a moment I lost my patience: 'Never mind photos, let's get on with the climbing!' Rightly, I was totally ignored, photos were taken, the steeper section was climbed, and we resumed our former rapid progress, Neil all the better for a breather.

Above, the face reared up in bands of loose rock and mixed ground. Over to the left, the lower portion of the NW ridge was a series of crumbling towers, but its upper third relented to an undulating snowy crest. A convenient ramp led diagonally across, linking face with ridge, and gave the key to our route. Well spotted, John and Neil.

Bill and I now took over the lead and John had his moment of folly. As I neared the ridge, his voice sounded: 'Are you sure that way leads onto the ridge?' 'Well, almost sure.' John thought my ramp looked less prominent than he had remembered from the glacier, so he searched for the 'true' ramp by climbing 70° scree to the right. Neil was pelted by a hail of loose stones. Fortunately the rock was so bad that, before striking him, it disintegrated into a comparatively harmless fine gravel. Bill and I sat brewing on the ridge and chuckling at the black comedy below. But Bill's laughter soon died away and I realised that he had taken our 'lightweight' tactics too seriously. We had donned our wind-proofs but, with inadequate layers of insulation, Bill's teeth were chattering in the cold wind. 'Where's your spare woolly?' – but he was lost for words. 'This isn't summer in the Alps, you know!' No reply. 'Let's see what I've got in my rucksack – ah yes, this woolly jumper any use?' Bill took it

gratefully. To stave off altitude dehydration we made a brew consisting of lukewarm water with a little orange powder dissolved in it. Now Bill got his own back: 'Weren't *you* supposed to bring the tea-bags?'

We continued up the snowy ridge; wisps of cloud and wind-blown powder raced across our path. The cloud played hide-and-seek with the sun which, when permitted, flashed diamond points of light off the snow crystals ahead. Progress was a struggle as we neared 7000m, hearts thumping, lungs working like bellows as the frosty air wheezed in and out. We moved upwards like creatures from some reptilian species with a slower life-clock.

Suddenly, John stopped. There was no more ridge. He thought the very top might be a cornice, and demanded a rope to tie on to. So protected, he climbed the last few feet and found no cornice, but a knife-edged snow ridge on which we could only sit *à cheval*; except for John, who entertained us with a little dance on the very crest – no doubt a Hillbilly hop from the mountains of his native New Hampshire.

Feelings on the top were a mixture of joy and satisfaction at a job well done, and smug mutual congratulation; exhilaration at the staggering view, and worry about the descent. Cigar-shaped clouds raced across the sky, and we had no reserves of food or bivvy gear should things not go according to plan.

Like cats up a tree, we now had to get down. We abseiled the ramp, but did not have enough gear to abseil the lower face. Nor did we fancy a long, front-pointing down climb. So we opted for an alternative descent: a longer, but easier, diagonal 'girdle' to the other side of the face, on an inclined terrace of thigh-deep powder of doubtful stability. Eventually, with legs of jelly, we staggered down to the glacier and across to our camp.

I had caught Neil's stomach bug and had a hellish night of vomiting and diarrhoea. Then the snow started to fall, and continued the next day as we returned to Base Camp. We were glad we had decided on the single-day tactic. We 'wound down' by climbing several other mountains in the area. Then there was the long, contented journey back – and a bill for $10,500 from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation for the extra peaks climbed. (The bill has since been considerably reduced.) So much for Harish's optimism! But even this sting in the tail could do nought to sour the memories of this most successful and happy summer.

Summary:	Indo–British Chong Kumdan Expedition 1991
Region visited	Eastern Karakoram, Ladakh, northern India
Members	
British	Dave Wilkinson, Paul Nunn, Lindsay Griffin, John Porter, Bill Church, Neil McAdie
Indian	Harish Kapadia, Muslim Contractor, Dhiren Pania, Bhupesh Asher, Vijay Kothari, Ajay Tambe
Main peak climbed	Chong Kumdan I (7071m), 1st ascent Route: W face/NW ridge Porter, Church, McAdie, Wilkinson. 4 August

Other 1st ascents	(various combinations of climbers) Chong Kumdan V (6520m) Chong Kumdan IV (6520m) Kichik Kumdan (6640m) Laknis (6235m) Kumdan Terong (6456m) Landay (6170m)
Other ascents	Chogam (6250m) Stos (6005m) Skyang (5770m)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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